

The External Security of Cyprus: Challenges and Potential Threats

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Introduction

Whereas Operation Entebbe in Uganda on July 4th 1976 can be considered as an example of daring commando attempts to save victims of terrorism, the events that transpired in February 1978¹ during the intervention of Egyptian commandos in Larnaca can only be seen as a continuous historical reminder that Cyprus, being a central geographical node in itself, is also the easternmost part of Europe and the last “post” before the turbulent subsystem of the Middle East. The 1978 event proved that Cyprus could, suddenly, become the terrain of a crisis incident including the acts of Islamic terrorism.

The events of the afternoon of February 19th testify to the fact that Cyprus is not only a potential theatre for terrorist acts but also a potential target. This danger emerges from the current form taken by Islamic terrorism, whether springing from Sunni extremism or its Shia counterpart. At the same time it should be understood that the current expression of extreme-right terrorism does not constitute a substantive threat for the internal security of the Republic of Cyprus, due to the social dynamics that have developed on the island both in terms of state capacity as well as socio-historically.

ELAM

EOKA B, a proxy paramilitary group organized by the Greek military dictatorship, that was active in Cyprus during the 1970s, with its activity culminating in a coup d'état on July 15th 1974, is merely four decades old. Currently, the extreme-right is currently being expressed by the ideological and activist actions of ELAM (Εθνικό Λαϊκό Μέτωπο – National Popular Front), a sister organization to Greece's Golden Dawn.

Beyond the identical ideological elements between the two organizations, ELAM constitutes a different case from Golden Dawn for two reasons: one historical and one connected to Cypriot particularities. The historical factor is obvious: Cyprus,

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¹ The author's uncle was present during the 1978 events as he was serving as a policeman in Larnaca airport. Personal testimony, Themis Constantinou, September 2014.

contrary to Greece, was never occupied by the Nazis. As a result the points of reference, both semantically (through the use of Nazi symbols) as well as ideologically, are incompatible; numerous Cypriots during the 1930s and 1940s, regardless of political ideology, fought with the British Army (in what is known as the Cyprus Regiment).

The second factor is connected with the historical composition of the Greek Cypriot political right. Both the Makarios faction as well as the Grivas faction had Enosis as their common aim. As a result, during the formation of the post-1974 political system, the Greek Cypriot right was absorbed by parties across the board of the political spectrum, including right wing DISY, right wing EVROKO, centrist DIKO and socialist EDEK. It can be argued that the overwhelming majority of ELAM voters is made of disappointed supporters of the “Grivas supporters” wing of DISY, which constitutes the Greek Cypriot far-right, rather than neo-Nazi ideologues.

ELAM has not adopted the tactics of Golden Dawn beyond a few isolated incidents, such as the attack on an NGO festival in Larnaca in 2010, due to:

- a. The composition of the Greek Cypriot society, a closed society living in a restricted geographical space and with an instinctual dislike of violence.
- b. Strict legislation concerning cases of violent attacks.
- c. The relatively smooth integration of migrants in Cypriot society.

Cyprus is a *sui generis* multicultural society, with members of ethnicities from the Middle East, Asia and Europe coexisting without tensions in the areas controlled by the Republic. In any case, ELAM is also being discreetly monitored by the RoC's security services.² At the same time in the House of Representatives, the legislative body of the RoC, there exists a common understanding that ELAM needs to be isolated by the constitutional parties.

Organized crime

Cypriot organized crime also operates through its own particular characteristics. Illegal activity in Cyprus revolves mainly around drug trafficking, human trafficking and prostitution, as well as gambling. Drug trafficking consists mostly of the illegal trade of cannabis, produced in the Cypriot countryside in areas that are parts of the British Sovereign Base Areas, where the RoC police presence is limited. The other

² Interview with Nikos Nikolaou, the officer in charge of Cyprus Police's Counter Terrorism Office, October 2014.

two long-standing aspects of Cypriot crime are gambling, with the operation of illegal makeshift casinos, and the coercion of women that may also EU citizens (largely from Moldova, Romania and Bulgaria) into prostitution. Cypriot organized crime seems to be unconnected to international terrorism.

Islamic terrorism

The phenomenon of Islamic terrorism is not something new in Cyprus. The recent arrest³ of a 24-year old Lebanese man carrying a Swedish passport who was planning attacks on Israeli targets in Cyprus as a member of the terrorist organization Hezbollah, is indicative of the potential dangers. The main reasons that the government-controlled areas of Cyprus can potentially be of interest to Islamic terrorism actors, beyond the island's proximity to the Middle East are:

- a. The country's contribution to the international coalition formed by the US, European and Arab states against the Islamic State. The Akrotiri airbase in Limassol is being used by the RAF for the bombardment of ISIS positions in Iraq. This is also the case with the radar base in Troodos, which is known to gather intelligence for British services.
- b. The country's strategic relationship with Israel, Egypt and Jordan in terms of bilateral issues as well as regarding the future exploitation of hydrocarbons in the Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone.
- c. The historical presence of a significant number of Arab communities in Cyprus,⁴ mainly of Syrians, Lebanese and Egyptians. The number of Syrians living in Cyprus has increased recently by as much as 40% according to data from the Civil Registry and Migration Department of the Ministry of the Interior.

The occupied areas need to be examined as a different case since there is no official record of the number of Arabs living in the north of the island. Also, the RoC is

³ The 24 year old was arrested in July 2012. He admitted planning six operations against Israeli targets in Cyprus. As stated in the interview with the head of the Counter Terrorism Office, the police found a way to indict and condemn the man despite the fact that at that point Cyprus had not yet ratified the European agreement defining Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. The young man is currently serving a term of four years in prison and will be deported to Sweden upon his release.

⁴ According to the Mol, about 2.000 Syrians currently reside in Nicosia and 3.000 - 4.000 in Limassol.

unable to collect intelligence on the occupied areas,⁵ thus relying only on intelligence from abroad. However, according to the Head of the Central Intelligence Service, Andreas Pentaras, the RoC has succeeded in intercepting individuals under suspicion of being ISIS members that attempted to travel from the rest of Europe to Syria through the government-controlled areas of the Republic. The author has been unable to confirm this information, but it should be noted that security measures at official crossing points as well as in other areas of the demarcation line have been stepped up in order to prevent the entry of persons suspected to be members of extremist organizations into the RoC. It should be noted that there are extended references in social media and other fora used by ISIS members to the use of airbases in Cyprus by the eight British Tornado bombers currently operating against targets in Iraq. The references are often backed by photographs of the aircrafts that have been published in the Cypriot and international press.

Possible scenarios

As explicitly stated⁶ by the Counter Terrorism Office of the RoC, the main scenarios currently examined by the Cypriot authorities regarding the possibility of a terrorist strike in the areas controlled by the Republic are:

- a. A strike against targets such as the Embassy of Israel or of any Arab state with which Cyprus maintains trade or other bilateral relations. Possible targets under this scenario also include the offices of foreign companies such as American-Israeli Noble Energy, which is currently drilling in the “Aphrodite” gas field in the Cypriot EEZ, and has its regional headquarters in Larnaca.
- b. Terrorist strikes against Russian targets (such as the offices of Russian companies) in Limassol or even directly against Russian tourists, especially during the tourist season, by organizations connected to Islamist terror networks of the Caucasus region.
- c. Arab communities – mainly Shia and Sunni Syrians living in Limassol – which are more active during the past two years. This possibility could be seen in two ways: On the one hand, during these two years there were cases of clashes between groups who support and oppose the Assad regime. These clashes resulted in deaths in 2011, but thankfully there were no victims have

⁵ Interview of CIS chief Andreas Pentaras in the Cypriot edition of “Kathimerini”, 21.09.2014.

⁶ See note no.2, interview conducted on 22.09.2014.

been recorded since then.⁷ On the other hand, there are recorded cases of pick-up trucks transferred to Syria through the occupied areas. The author's coworker and journalist in "Politis" Chrysta Ntzani has reported⁸ that trucks of this type, commonly referred to in Cyprus as "double cabin" trucks, were being bought by Syrians in the government controlled areas and sent, through the occupied areas, to Homs, and other place in Syria, in order to support the forces opposing the Assad regime. The information presented in the article has been corroborated by the Iranian FARS agency, which reported that "double cabin" trucks with car plates of the "TRNC" were being used by the armed rebels fighting against the Assad regime.

It is worth noting that in addition to assessing these three scenarios, the Cypriot security services are also collaborating with European authorities as well as the secret services of countries such as Israel. Beyond the evaluation of their own intelligence, the Cypriot security services also have cryptography at their disposal to enhance communication with other agencies. Moreover, the recent decision of president Anastasiades government to upgrade the Central Intelligence Service both institutionally as well as technically has strengthened its role; the relevant legislation was approved in late October. The political authority for the approval of intervention by RoC security services in case of terrorist activities lies with the Ministry for Justice (particularly the Minister and the ministry's Director General – the latter coordinates the actions of the Counter Terrorism Office jointly with the Chief of Police).

Lastly, it is also worth noting that in an interview with the author, Israeli sources when asked to comment on the third scenario (point c.), estimated that "definitely a 1 to 2% of Arabs residing in the RoC espouse extremist/ Salafist ideas."

Occupied areas

The possibility of connections between persons suspected for being members of international terrorist networks and the so-called "Turkish Republic of Northern

⁷ "Politis", the newspaper where the author is currently employed, has extensively covered cases such as the attempted murder of an Iranian by a Syrian in Limassol in June 2011 as well as a more recent case in May 2014 when Syrians of opposing ideological stance in the Syrian Civil War clashed, citing personal differences.

⁸ Published in "Politis" on June 4th 2013 and also available online on the journalist's personal blog at, http://chrystantzani.wordpress.com/2013/07/04/diplokampina_syria/.

“Cyprus” is not new. According to recent reports⁹ in “Kıbrıs Postası” and “Famagusta Gazette,” it is possible that cells connected to the Islamic State have found refuge in the occupied areas. This scenario was confirmed by the interview of Andreas Pentaras to “Kathimerini”¹⁰ where the chief of CIS stressed the important role of Turkey in the development of the Islamic State, while pointing out that European Jihadis travelling to and from Syria through Turkey pass through Cyprus as well. Further, the Saudi Arabian Islamic Development Bank, the Bahraini El-Baraka and the Turkish-Kuwaiti Turk Bank, which according to media reports and information acquired by the secret services of countries such as Israel play a role in funding the activities of the Islamic State, have a significant number of branches in the occupied areas, including Nicosia, Kyrenia and Famagusta. Interpol, according to the RoC's Counter Terrorism Office,¹¹ is now also taking into account the Islamic State when assessing information regarding international criminal networks active in the occupied areas.

The case of the occupied areas is an enigma for the Cypriot authorities since they are currently *de facto* unable to police them. However, the fact that there are no maritime borders between ISIS (e.g. through Syria) and Cyprus makes it unlikely that an attack will take place in the areas controlled by the RoC.

Social realities

The author has been living in Nicosia's inner walled city (the old town) for the past four years, a two minute walk from the Ledras street checkpoint and ten minutes from the largest mosque in the sector of the city controlled by the RoC, in the Omerye area. The historic mosque attracts a large number of the area's Muslim residents, who are mostly Syrian, Lebanese and Egyptian. In the southeast of the walled city, on Charilaos Trikoupis street, there is now a small Arab community located around a number of Arabic shops. Many of the owners of these shops happen to be Syrian political refugees forced to leave the country since 2011 and the start of the civil war. These are mostly *halal* butcher shops, traditional barber shops, grocery stores, small restaurants and electronic shops.

⁹ ‘ISIL could already have foothold in north Cyprus,’ *Famagusta Gazette*, 22.09.14; and, ‘ISIS is mobilising in Cyprus’ - an interview of Middle East expert Hüsnü Mahalli to *Kıbrıs Postası*, 26.06.2014.

¹⁰ See note no. 5.

¹¹ See note no. 2

Having had social interaction with the residents for the past four years, including with his barber who is originally from Homs, the author has arrived to a number of conclusions about the social characteristics of Nicosia's Arab residents:

- a. Most Muslims are moderate Sunnis who often smoke, even though they are generally observant of the Ramadan, at least during the day-time.
- b. They have adapted relatively easily to the Cypriot way of life. Their jobs are profitable and help them maintain consumer habits similar to those of the average Cypriot when it comes to clothing, quality of life, car or mobile phone ownership.
- c. Most of them express an intense distaste for the Assad regime but tend to be less open among themselves due to the fear that they might be talking to a loyalist. Political discussions are often intense and animated when dealing with the situation in the Middle East.
- d. The majority feels strongly anti-American, anti-Iranian and anti-Israeli, with opinions often touching upon well-known conspiracy theories.
- e. They feel strongly against the Daesh', as the Islamic State is called in Arabic.
- f. When expressing their position on the Syrian civil war, many express opinions that reflect those of the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood.

While being interviewed, Michalis,¹² the owner of three barber shops on Trikoupi who is in Cyprus since 2006, was asked jokingly "if he ever had any jihadis around." His answer was illuminating: "If I see any, I'll first call the police and then call you." The mufti at the mosque of the "tourkomahalla" (Turkish neighborhood) in the Agios Antonios area of Limassol acted in a similar manner when, in August, he immediately called the police¹³ upon noticing suspicious behavior by a Congolese and a Senegalese man who had threatened him that they would "blow up everything" when confronted during the time of prayer. The two men were arrested and turned out that they were not connected to any terrorist Islamist networks. It would seem that Arab migrants living in the government-controlled areas have been fully integrated into the social fabric of modern Cypriot society, despite often facing racism, and are generally progressive and industrious. Of course one cannot rule out

¹² Real name Hamody Sy Moza.

¹³ As reported, among other media, in "Politis" on 13.08.2014

the possibility that radical cells exist among them, especially if modern trends taken into account. However a scenario where they would become radicalized seems distant, at least for the time being.

Conclusions

The threat of international terrorism to Cyprus is no longer a fictional construct. It has made its appearance in the past and might do so again in the future. A terrorist organization is not Weberian in nature: it is a network expanding through extending its trends and has the most impact on the nodes which carry the most connections. The geographical and geopolitical importance of Cyprus means that the island is such a node by definition; a fact that makes it a vulnerable target especially when considering its potential in the energy sector of the northeastern Mediterranean as well as the fact that the area extending from Libya to Kobani to Kirkuk is in flux.

While continuing the efforts to solve its political problem, Cyprus has been able to develop, , both its preemptive capacities as well as its substantial alliances in the global fight against terrorism. The rapprochement with countries of central importance to the region, such as Israel and Egypt, together with the maintenance of steadily excellent diplomatic relations with Arab states in the Middle East and the Gulf, are turning Cyprus into a center of intelligence and cooperation in the fight against modern international Islamic terrorism; a threat made pertinent in a dramatic and tragic way through the activities of the Islamic State. More importantly, Cyprus is one of the 28 member-states of the EU and the southeasternmost extremity of Europe, essentially controlling the end of the Mediterranean where the EU joins the Middle East and hence Asia.

Despite its particular characteristics such as the *de facto* situation in the north, the recent economic crisis and the continuous failure to solve the Cyprus Problem, Cyprus remains a safe state with low rates of crime.¹⁴ It is indicative that in Cyprus there were only 69 recorded armed robberies in 2007 and 189 in 2010 while at the same time the average rate in the EU according to Eurostat and Europol reaches 14,000 armed robberies a year.

The RoC has been adapting continuously both at the police level as well as through the institutional restructuring of its intelligence services, responding to the new realities as formed by the region's fluid politics and the international challenge of terrorism to the Middle East's security and stability. The fact that Cyprus has in the past been the locus of conflict connected to terrorism, such as the Larnaca airport

¹⁴ See 'Trends in crime and criminal justice, 2010' - Issue number 18/2013, Eurostat.

incident of 1978 as well as the assassinations of Arab and Israeli citizens,¹⁵ forces the country to shield itself both through preemptive diplomacy as well as through the upgrading of its operational capacity.

The challenges for Cyprus are only going to multiply in the coming years, as evidenced by the current climate in the Cypriot EEZ where Turkish provocations have led to a halt in negotiations and the inflammation of the negative political climate in the area. That realization is especially prescient when considering the potential commercial use of Cypriot hydrocarbons, which will be a challenge not only on the technical front but also through the involvement of a multiethnic workforce. An energy strategy that would develop without first being properly shielded from potential international threats is likely to face significant challenges.

Finally, the Republic of Cyprus and particularly the Greek Cypriot community will have to realize that a possible solution of the Cyprus Problem, a development seen as unavoidable in the evolving new landscape of the South Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East, will not only put an end to an unacceptable *status quo* that has remained unchallenged for more than 40 years, but will also release new dynamics and challenges for a future federal and reunified Cyprus. This new state of affairs requires an inspired, well-planned and functional security policy that will look straight into the 21st century.

¹⁵ Specific examples include the assassination of three Israelis by members of the PLO at the Larnaca Marina in 1985, as well as the bomb attack against the Israeli embassy in 1988 on the one hand and the assassination of El-Sempai and the Israeli sabotage of the ship “Sol Fryni” in Limassol in 1988 on the other.